

Father Needs Assessment:
A Survey of Fathers involved with Child Welfare
Statewide Results
April 2005

Father Involved with Child Welfare:

This survey was designed specifically for fathers involved with Child Protective Services. As a very small subset of all fathers, these fathers are likely to have struggled with particularly challenging family issues and thus have unique needs and perspectives.

Background

The provision of social services including child welfare services has evolved in recent years to be more strength-based and family-systems focused, resulting in a broader appreciation of fathers. Changing family patterns have also made fathering programs more visible in recent years (Featherstone, 2001). Fatherhood is important to men and their families and the notion that parenting is somehow forgotten by men is not supported by research (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). This is true of all fathers, low income, middle class, working class, and so on. The father/child relationship is critically important in building skills and psychological competence for children. Disruptions of the father/child relationship are detrimental for all children but especially for boys. Positive interactions, on the other hand, benefit both the children and the fathers by creating social bonds and role models that protect against adult criminality and child abuse.

In child welfare, the Adoption and Safe Family Act (ASFA) and related Child and Family Services Review emphasize the need to explore the whole family, including fathers and father's extended families, to find a safe home for children. These initiatives promote the best practices of engaging all parents in the planning and intervention process to promote child safety, permanent homes, and wellbeing. Although there is a great deal of literature on fathers in general including fathers and divorce, child development, and attachment, there is a poverty of research to guide practices for fathers involved with child protective services. Historically, child welfare systems have ignored or labeled fathers as too problematic (Franck, 2001). The few published attempts to understand fathers with child welfare agencies support the notion that they are infrequently contacted (O'Donnell, 2001) and need support for adequate parenting (Lagnese & Green, 1976). There is no previous study published that sought to identify father needs when involved with child welfare. The conditions within the family of abuse or neglect that bring a family to the attention of child welfare make these fathers uniquely challenged yet critically important to the well being of vulnerable children.

The Kentucky Department for Community Based Services is seeking to change these conditions by actively striving to engage the fathers of children involved with protective services. As part of the Program Improvement Plan for the state, staff and supervisors are finding fathers and then inviting fathers to family team meetings, identifying paternal relatives for placement, and providing referrals and services to improve parenting ability for fathers. Standard Operating Procedures have been changed

to include expectations that fathers will be included as active partners in the care of children and with the agency.

In initiating this survey, we knew that there was much room for improvement. We also knew that the challenges faced by fathers involved in troubled families were more complex than challenges facing other fathers. This survey is a beginning, the first attempt to identify fathers' needs when they are involved with child protection services.

Purpose

The purpose of this Father Survey was to conduct a needs and satisfaction assessment among fathers involved with CPS, specifically to:

- Identify the overall satisfaction of fathers with the agency practices including being invited to and having input into family planning conferences.
- Identify barriers to fathers accessing and interacting with the agency.
- Identify services that fathers received and those that they may have wanted.

Because there has been no previous survey of fathers in child welfare, the survey was intended to identify needs and use the results to improve practices with fathers and in doing so, to improve outcomes and options for children.

A second survey on fathers was directed toward staff in Protection and Permanency and Family Support. Results of the staff survey are reported in another report by statewide and regional results.

Methodology

Because there were no previous surveys and few studies of fathers involved with child welfare, a survey was created. CPS and policy specialists, field social workers, university faculty, and a father with experience with the agency designed the father survey and had it reviewed by two fathers prior to finalization. The survey included 19 questions that were 5-point rating scales, checklists of services received and 'wished for', and demographic indicators. One open-ended question was included for comments. The survey was written at the 4.9 grade level, was printed back to back on one sheet, and required simple check marks to complete. The measure was tested for internal consistency as measure of reliability. The rating scale items had an alpha of .95 and the service checklist at .88. Thus, the survey was highly reliable.

After obtaining IRB approval, names identified in active cases as biological, legal, or adoptive fathers were pulled from the state data system (TWIST). Fathers were named in cases that were active between October and December, 2004. Children and families in these child welfare cases were served in the home (in-home) or in foster care (out of home care). To avoid sending a survey to fathers with potential issues of violence or other concerns designated staff members in each of the Cabinet's 16 service regions identified fathers that should not receive a survey. Three to four names were identified in each service region as inappropriate for the survey process.

A mailed survey was implemented in January of 2005. The surveys were labeled for service region and coded for the type of father (birth, legal, or adoptive) and type of case (in-home, out of home). A cover letter explained the survey, invited participation in the survey, and informed participants of the confidential and anonymous nature of the survey. Two mailings were used. The first mailing included a return envelope with a real stamp to be returned to a P.O. box in Frankfort. A second mailing of the survey was sent about three weeks after the first mailing with a new cover letter, replacement survey, and a business reply envelope to the same P.O. box. All cover letters provided the participant with phone numbers to call with questions.

The following table illustrates the survey process. In this table, the percentage of surveys returned as undeliverable is relevant. As can be seen, the names and addresses for fathers identified in the state child welfare database were inaccurate in many cases. Although the response rate and rate of inaccurate data is disappointing, these findings provide a baseline for improvement

# of father names from TWIST (paired with a child so that one father could be named more than 1 time)	12, 602
# left after father names with missing addresses were deleted.	10,966 (13.7% missing address)
Unduplicated possibly deliverable father names	3, 924
Number returned as undeliverable	1,493 (38% undeliverable)
Number of surveys returned and response rate	341 (14% response rate)

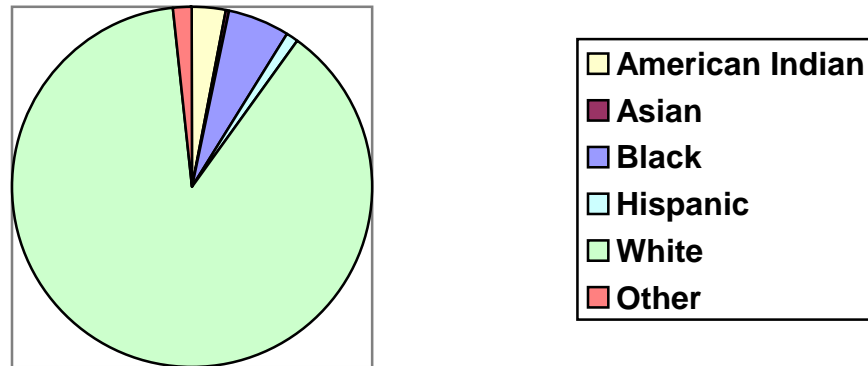
There were no statistically significant differences between surveys that were delivered or undeliverable when comparing the type of service (in-home vs. OOHHC care) or the father type (biological, legal, or adoptive). This suggests that the results reliably portray a representative sample. Although these findings are not reliable by the service region because of small sample size for the region, the overall 341 surveys are reliable at the state level.

CUSTOMERS IN THE SURVEY

Fathers responding to the mail survey included 337 biological fathers, 19 adoptive fathers and 2 legal fathers. Demographic information is displayed here to aid in understanding father's current situation.

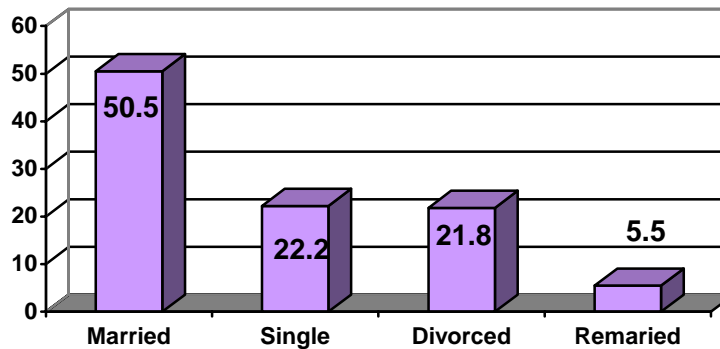
Race/Ethnicity

88.1 % Caucasian, 5.5% African American, 3.1% American Indian, 1.2% Hispanic,



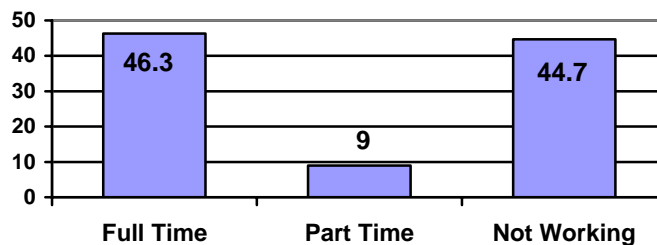
Marital Status:

The majority of fathers who completed a survey were married:

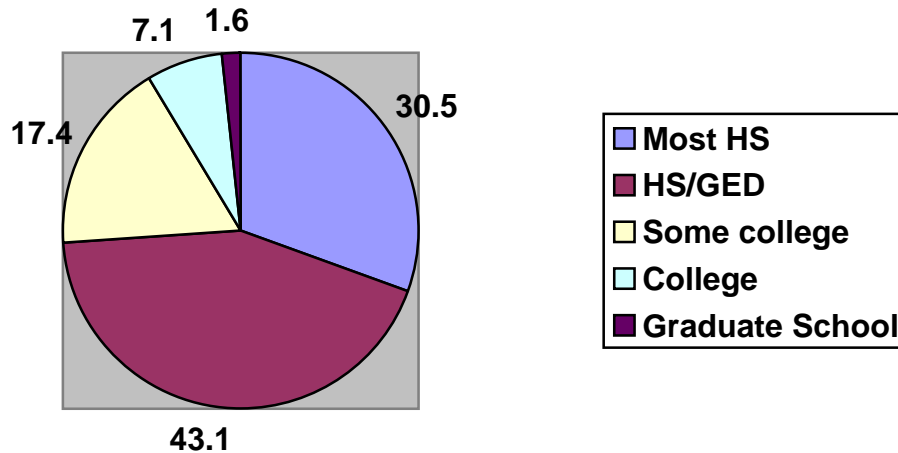


Employment Status

Fathers were asked about current work status as working part-time, full-time or not working. Percentages are as follows:



Educational Status is displayed here. This pattern is similar to the overall educational pattern in Kentucky with 25.9% with most high school and 33.6 with HS, 18.5% with some college, and 10.3% with a Bachelor's degree.



Number of Children

On average, fathers indicated that they had 2.8 children with a range of 1-12 children. Percentages are as follows:

- | | | | |
|-------------------|-------|-----------------------|------------------|
| ● One Child: | 22.4% | ● Six Children: | 2.8% |
| ● Two Children: | 31.2% | ● Seven Children: | 1.9% |
| ● Three Children: | 20.6% | ● 8, 11, 12 children: | 1.2% (4 fathers) |
| ● Four Children: | 13.1% | | |
| ● Five Children: | 6.9% | | |

Children in Foster Care

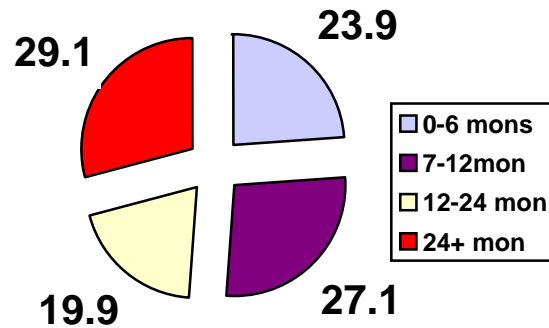
Fathers were asked if they had a child in foster care; they responded:

- 59.6% have never had a child in foster care;
- 24.8% currently have a child in foster care; and
- 15.5% have had a child in care, but do not have at present.

In a summary analysis, the responses of fathers for children served in-home versus served in the past or present in out-of-home care were compared. There were no significant differences between the groups in needs or satisfaction.

Length of Time Working with CHFS (Social Services)

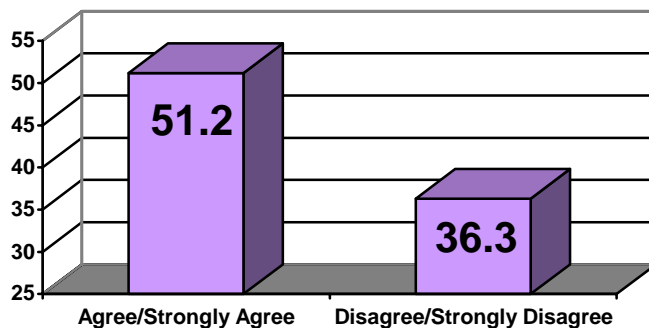
Fathers were asked about the length of time that they have been customers of the Cabinet. Their responses were equally divided between 4 categorical choices.



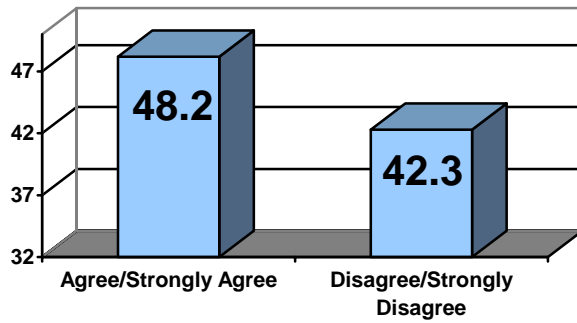
Results

Survey Questions. The responses from fathers tended to be either positive or negative, with few undecided responses. Consequently, the responses to each question are displayed by those that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (suggesting satisfaction) and those that disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (suggesting dissatisfaction). The survey items are displayed sequentially with the most satisfied responses displayed first.

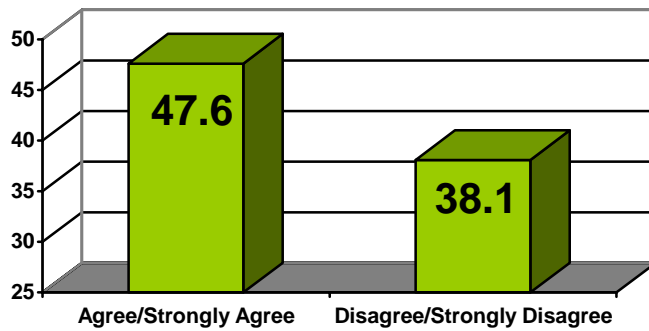
Item #6: *I was invited to meetings regarding my family.*



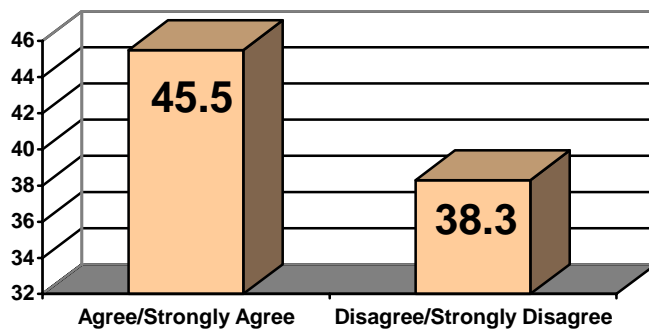
Item #2: *The social service worker had regular contact with me.*



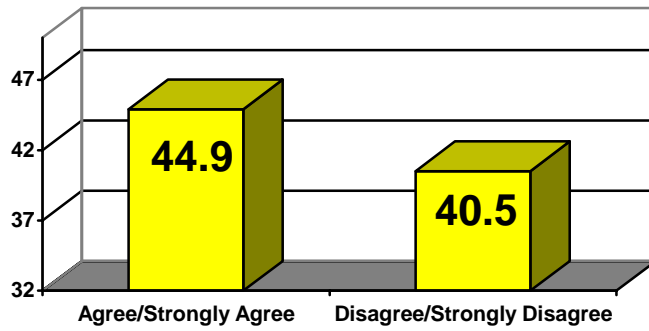
Item #10. *The staff from this agency were professional and polite.*



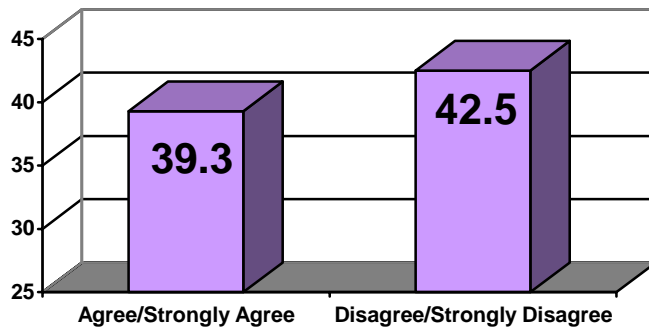
Item #3: *My children have been helped by the agency.*



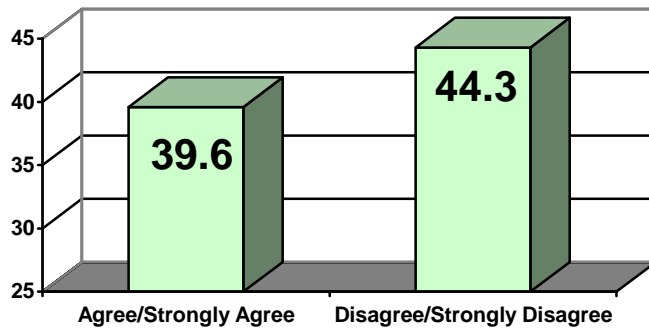
Item #4: *My ideas about my children were taken seriously.*



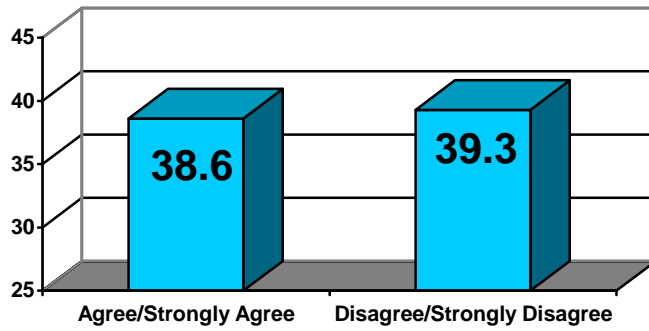
Item #11: *I would seek help from this agency again, if needed.*



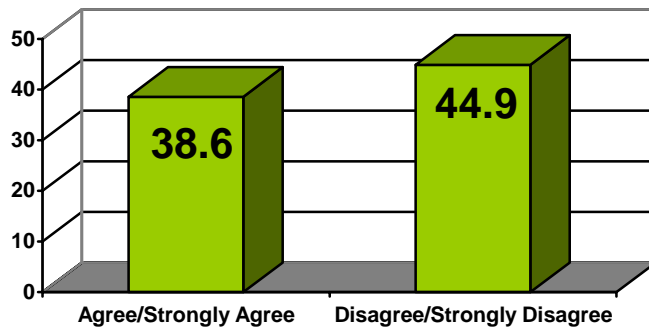
Item #12: *If I had a friend in need, I would suggest that they get help from this agency.*



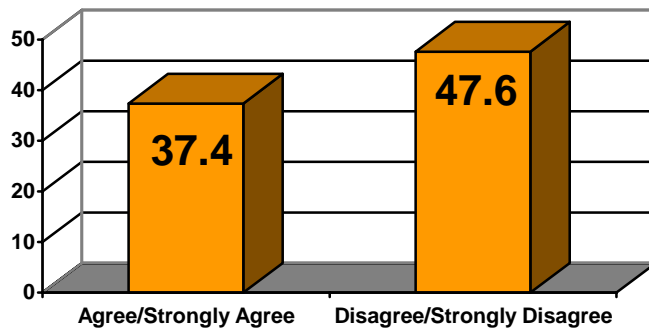
Item #9: *The services I received helped me to be a better father.*



Item #8: *My worker told me about services that would assist my family.*



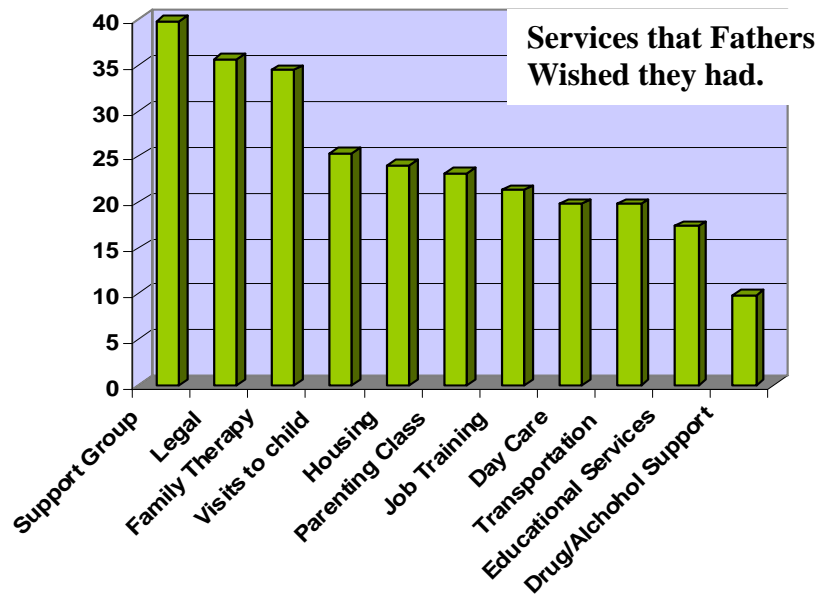
Item #5: *I felt involved in making decisions with the agency.*



Services to Meet the Needs of Fathers

The survey asked fathers to identify the services they had received and the ones they 'wish' they had received.

Had This Service	%	Wished I had this service	%
Visits with my children	50.6	Fathers Support Group	39.8
Family Therapy	30.3	Legal Services	35.6
Parenting Classes	29.8	Family Therapy	34.4
Legal Services	22.8	Visits to my child	25.4
Day Care	17.1	Finding housing	24.0
Drug/Alcohol Support Group	15.1	Parenting Classes	23.1



Comments

The final question on the survey tool requested that the participants give feedback for ways to improve Cabinet services. The comments were coded as either positive comments, suggestion/neutral comments, or disappointed comments. 8.3% listed a positive comment. 48.3% offered a suggestion of neutral comment. 43.3% offered a disappointed comment or "area for improvement." A few examples are here.

Positive comments

Fifteen surveys praised their worker (often listing a specific name) or stating that their worker was wonderful, terrific, etc.

The remaining positive comments were thankful in nature. Statements focused on saying job well done, services are great, thank you and so on. Examples are:

- “Good job. Keep up the good work”
- “Thank you for all your help.”
- “I just wanted to say that social services and my worker have helped my family though tough times.”
- “Your agency has been very helpful to my family. Thank you.”
- Your services are great and have helped us tremendously. Our social worker is a great person and cares greatly about her clients and their needs.”
- I thank her very much for everything that she's done with us. Thank you for asking for a father's point of view!!! It seems since 1992 I have been put on a back burner just because I am a father. It's about time fathers start getting rights too!!!. Thank you again.

Neutral Comments or Suggestions

Eleven surveys contained comments that social services or workers need to keep an open mind when working with fathers. In essence, these comments suggested the “maternal” nature of the agency and wished for equal rights with mothers.

Many surveys contained comments that were neutral or very case specific offering more case information than suggestions. Some examples of these include the following:

- “I feel the worker should place my child with me.”
- “I would like to see my son.”
- “I wish I could be more involved in my child's life.”

The remaining surveys contained suggestions specifically related to either their worker or the court system. Examples include:

- “Office is understaffed. You need more help.”
- “Workers need training on returning phone calls.”
- “Have a more professional staff.”
- “Better training and qualifications for receptionists.”
- “The court system needs good judges that will listen to kids.”
- “Don't allow lawyers to pit parents against each other.”
- “Workers need training on how to do investigations.”

Disappointed comments

Common themes in the negative comments included the following: discrimination against males, lack of contact from workers (home visits and phone calls) and very case specific information often with contact information. These comments have or will be followed-up on.

A small number of comments were more pointed:

- “Fire my worker.”
- “It's a travesty that my tax dollars are being wasted.”
- “Leave my family alone.”

- “We are harassed by this agency, have been for years.”
- “I feel that this department has been set up primarily for mothers, while ignoring the needs of fathers.”
- “I feel you don't investigate your case strongly enough for the father. All fathers aren't BAD fathers!”

Summary

Strengths of DCBS Services to Fathers:

- Inviting fathers to meetings
- Social service workers having regular contact with fathers.
- Staff treating fathers professional and politely
- Fathers perceiving that their children had been helped by the agency.
- Considering the ideas of fathers seriously.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Informing fathers about services to help their families
- Involving fathers in decisions with the agency.
- Willingness to return for services or refer a friend.
- Expanding services for fathers based on their identified needs.

References

- Hamer, J. & Marchioro, K. (2002). Becoming custodial dads: exploring parenting among low income and working class fathers. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 64 (1)
- O'Donnell, J M. (2001). Paternal involvement in kinship foster care services in one father and multiple father families. *Child Welfare*, 80 (4).
- Franck, E. (2001). Outreach to birthfathers of children in out of home care. *Child Welfare*, 80 (3).
- Eggebeen, D. J. & Knoester, C. (2001). Does fatherhood matter for men? *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 63 (2).
- Featherstone, B. (2001). Research Review: putting fathers on the child welfare agenda. *Child & Family Social Work*, 6 179-186.